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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes an ethnographic study conducted in 1989-1990 assessing the effectiveness of the Denver Indian Center's preschool program in preparing Native American children for the transition to public school. The Center, a fully licensed child care facility, serves an intertribal community of approximately 18,200 Native Americans. The development of literacy, pre-math and other cognitive skills, fine and gross motor skills, social emotional growth, and knowledge of Native American culture is stressed through the curriculum. The researcher, as a nonparticipant observer for the school year, recorded teacher's and children's activities and teacher child interactions. The public school teachers were interviewed to assess their evaluation of the Native American students' achievement. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills, administered by the classroom teachers, provided information about Native American students' achievment in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Results of the study indicate that in kindergarten these Native American students were socially withdrawn and struggling academically. By first and second grade the students became more verbal and some chose to share their cultural heritage with others. Results of a questionnaire revealed that parents were supportive of the preschool curriculum. The study implies the need for the involvement of Native Americans in their children's education in order to foster a cultural identity and to promote awareness of the developmental needs of young children. (LP)

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An Abstract of

A STUDY OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM 'THE CIRCLE NEVER ENDS'

A Dissertation

Presented to

the College of Human Services

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Janice E. Luellen

August 1991

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

How successful is a culturally thematic early childhood curriculum for young Native American children in preparing them for kindergarten and their elementary school experiences that follow? This study sought to examine how successful the children's transition was in the public school; kindergarten, first- and second-grade. This research question was investigated by examining the Native American students' academic differences, and differences in self-esteem, using both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment.

Focus of the Study

The Denver Indian Center offers a three-year preschool program, The Circle of Learning: Early Childhood Education Program, for Native American children who will be entering public schools in the Denver area. The preschool has been in existence for eight years and now has students enrolled and completing public middle school. The Center serves an intertribal community of approximately 18,200 Native Americans, representing 50 different tribes, languages and cultures (Harjo, 1987).

The Director and staff of the Denver Indian Center's Circle of Learning: Early Childhood Education Program have developed a culturally thematic curriculum, 'The Circle Never Ends.' The program is designed to be intercultural, fitting the multitribal

urban setting. Native American legends are used as the center of the curriculum 'web.' Each unit presents a tribal legend through the use of oral tradition, transmitting in a cultural manner, traditional knowledge to the children. The children are first taught about themselves, then their awareness is increased to the rest of the world (Harjo, 1987).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was two-fold. The first part was to document the culturally thematic curriculum, 'The Circle Never Ends,' used by The Circle of Learning preschool program; and to give a description of the curriculum and its implementation (Borg and Gall, 1983). The second part was an investigation of the impact and effectiveness of the curriculum, 'The Circle Never Ends,' on the academic achievement of the Native American children who had experienced this program and are now in public schools.

Significance of the Study

This study provided insight into the effectiveness of a culturally thematic curriculum, 'The Circle Never Ends.' The results were based on qualitative and quantitative research, and gave information that can be used to formulate similar curricula for different cultural groups, other than the Native American, preparing to enter public school, as well as other Native American early childhood programs.

Chapter 2

In research involving qualitative methods, several bodies of related literature are usually necessary to provide an overview of the area of inquiry to be developed (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). For this reason, Chapter 2 was presented in three major areas; a historical perspective on the education of Native Americans, the importance of multicultural education and early childhood education.

Chapter 3

Setting

The Circle of Learning was an early childhood preschool program for the children ages 3-5 years of Native American families in a six-county area. The program focused on nurturing the child, parents and family. The program had three basic components:

Preschool
Home-Based Instruction
Parent Education

The early childhood education program was guided by a curriculum, 'The Circle Never Ends,' that allowed for the development of literacy, pre-math and other cognitive skills, fine and gross motor skills, and social emotional growth in a Native American cultural setting. This fully licensed child care facility (State of Colorado) provided three classrooms for two half-day sessions (morning and afternoon) of educational opportunities and nutritional services.

There was an enrollment of 45 intertribal students, with a waiting list of more than 25 children, in the program. The students represented 50 different Native American tribes. Many of the students reflected integrated backgrounds, representing two or more tribes (e.g., father Sioux and mother Hidatsa/Ute).

Methodology

This study used the ethnographic continuous observation method to produce an in-depth description of 'The Circle Never Ends' curriculum used by The Circle of Learning early childhood program at the Denver Indian Center. This included; the use of time, space, activities and materials, and patterns of teacher/child interaction. The researcher functioned as a nonparticipant observer for the 1989-90 school year, with permission and approval of the administrators and teachers of the early childhood education program at the Denver Indian Center.

There is always an implicit comparison in an ethnographic study (Mead and Wolfenstein, 1955). The example or model of the majority Anglo culture, as it is delivered and taught in the majority American preschools is juxtaposed upon the culturally different program; in this study 'The Circle Never Ends' curriculum. Therefore, the researcher functioned and observed in a cross-cultural context.

The researcher sat in a central location in The Circle of Learning classroom, collecting handwritten protocol notes giving an account of the teacher's and children's activities and teacher/child interactions during the school day. The use of time and space was observed and analyzed. Flowcharts were used

to show activity patterns of individual children, diagrams were prepared of the activities and materials in the room, and changes noted over time.

The instrument employed to assess parents' opinion of the culturally thematic curriculum was a one-page, research-generated questionnaire. The anonymous questionnaire was sent to four groups of parents/significant caregivers; those who had children ages 4-5 years in The Circle of Learning preschool program; those who had children in kindergarten, and those who had children in first- and second-grade in the Denver Public School system school year 1989-90, who had experienced 'The Circle Never Ends' curriculum used by The Circle of Learning preschool program at the Denver Indian Center.

The Denver Public School kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers who were interviewed were those who had received Native American students from The Circle of Learning preschool program. These children had attended The Circle of Learning preschool during the school years 1988-89, 1987-88 and 1986-87. The interview was to assess their evaluation of the Native American students' achievement. The information from these interviews was divided into three areas; academic performance, social interaction, and the cultural composite of students and materials in the classroom.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills was administered in the Denver Public Schools by the classroom teachers. The percentile scores of Native American students in kindergarten, and first- and second-grade, for the 1989-90 school year were examined. The scores were divided into two groups; Native American students

who had attended The Circle of Learning preschool and Native American students who had not attended The Circle of Learning preschool. There were three sets of percentile scores for each group; reading, language and math.

Chapter 4

This research described the specific curriculum, 'The Circle Never Ends,' used by The Circle of Learning preschool program: the structuring of time and space; the choice of activities and utilization of materials; and patterns of teacher/student interaction. Micro-ethnographic methods were used to draw implications concerning the perceived cultural rootedness of 'The Circle Never Ends' curriculum.

Two protocol examples from use of materials and use of time are given.

Artifacts were an important part of the lessons and changed with each region of study. The children were allowed to handle and, when possible, use different items. Tools, household items, clothing, games and ceremonial objects were used. The protocol given below was a lesson taught in January. The unit was 'A Member of a Family and a Tribe,' and the region was the Southwest.

> The teacher shared the book, Pictures from Navajo Land, with the children. They reviewed the book; the color of the land, claw symbol, making of baskets, and the use of cactus. "Last week we studied about clay. Do you remember why we taste the clay? If it is sweet then we can use it." She showed the children a picture of a rock formation. "What would be a good name for this rock?" The children suggested, "Rainbow bridge." It was also the name given in the book.

They then discussed the importance of blue corn. The teacher held up the book Corn is Maize (this book would also be added to the shelves). The book showed the grinding of corn with rocks. The corn was ground very fine. The teacher showed the children some finely ground blue corn that had been blessed. She told the children, "Mr. Emhoolah burns cedar for the blessing. A blessing can also be done with blue corn." The bag of blue corn was passed around so the children could feel the corn. The teacher then handed the bag of blue corn to Brian. "Brian, you are our Navajo. Would you put the corn on the desk?" Brian was very proud. He took the blue corn and very carefully placed it on the teacher's desk.

The three age groups came together for a special time, Cultural Circle. The teachers presented lessons and activities to increase the children's cultural knowledge and feelings of self-esteem. The following is from a protocol taken September 25, 1989.

.....Miss Lori then came to the center of the circle. She pointed out to the children that the drum they were using this week was different, it was a hand drum. They sang:

"Inkpata" - Dakota love song, sung in Sioux and English.

"Ala Ala" - Navajo happy song, sung in Navajo.

"Oh Great Eagle" - Sung in Lakota and English.

Miss Lori told the children, "The sun is still out." Then asked, "Is he sleeping yet?" The children smiled and shook their heads. They sang the song, "Che Chio." This song is not to be sung in the winter when the bear is sleeping.

Miss Madaline started the tape recorder and dancing music began. The children and teachers did the Friendship dance.

Some of the Elders had arrived early for lunch and saw the children dancing. A few of the Elders danced as they came across the gym floor. One lady sat and clapped her hands in time with the music. They all smiled at the children.

Data from the parents' opinion questionnaire was shown in tables with a commentary for each. Table 4.7 is shown as an example.

Table 4.7
Ranking of Responses from Parents/Significant Caregivers Given to: 'Have you noticed any changes in your child since attending The Circle of Learning program? If yes, please explain.'

Rank	Reasons	No. of Responses
1	Academic Learning	9
	asking questions	
	anxious to learn	
	likes to read and draw	
	language development skills	
	learning more	
2	Individual Growth	7
	assertive, not shy/afraid	
	open with peer group	
	mature/more independent	
	more outgoing	
3	Cultural Knowledge	3
	learn about being an Indian	
	cultural pride	
4	No Response	2

Semistructured interviews were carried out to assess public school teachers' evaluation of Native American students' achievement in the public schools. Data from these interviews were shown in tables with commentaries explaining each. Table 4.13 is offered as an example.

Table 4.13
Ranking of Responses Given to: 'How do you evaluate a student's progress in your reading or reading readiness program?'

Rank	Methods	No. of Responses
1	Teacher Observation	17
2	Tests provided by the Basal Readers	8
3	ALPAS	6
4	Portfolio	3
4	Enjoyment of Reading	3

Note: ALPAS is not given in Kindergarten.

The percentile scores of Native American students on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in kindergarten, first- and second-

grade, for the 1989-90 school year were examined and compared by the use of bar-graphs.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

1. In kindergarten these Native American students were found to be quiet, socially withdrawn and struggling academically.

It appeared that these Native American children experienced "cultural shock" upon entering public kindergarten. The children came from a warm, supporting environment, rich in cultural concepts, materials and methods. They then entered an environment foreign to them, sterile of their cultural heritage and instructed by a person for the most part lacking in cross-cultural techniques or multicultural teaching strategies. There was an omission of their culture in the environment, materials and methods used in these kindergarten classrooms.

2. In first- and second-grade these Native American students became more verbal in social and classroom interaction.

3. The transition from home to a classroom environment can be difficult for a six-year-old. If a cultural transition is added, some young children can be overwhelmed. Upon entering public school, children are pressed for self-identity. One boy had cut his hair during the year, another boy chose to keep his hair long, wearing it in a pony tail, retaining that portion of his cultural identity. Some of the children, by first- and second-grade chose to sing and dance for their classmates,

sharing their cultural heritage, while others chose to be silent.

4. There was no gender difference found in percentile scores made by Native American studerts on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The percentile scores were negatively skewed.

5. The study indicated that the number of minorities students was increasing in the Denver Public Schools. Almost half of the classrooms in this study had five or more different ethnic groups represented.

6. The parents of the Native American students who attended The Circle of Learning preschool program were supportive of 'The Circle Never Ends' curriculum.

Implications of the Study

'The Circle Never Ends' curriculum used by The Circle of Learning preschool program addressed the following issues brought out in the review of the literature;

- -need for changes and involvement of Native Americans in their children's education,
- -need for a cultural identity and sense of belonging, and
- -the developmental needs of the young child.

Appendix

Appendix include sections with:

J: National Indian Education Association Conference 1990
K: Indian Nation at Risk, Federal Task Force
L: Newspaper Clippings
M: Photographic Summary of The Circle of Learning Program